

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Robert T. Tally Jr., *Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel: A Postmodern Iconography* (Bloomsbury Literary Studies, 2013 paperback [first published 2011])

Robert Tally offers an examination of Kurt Vonnegut's novels through a postmodern lens. Tally acknowledges that Vonnegut's texts are, predominantly, more modernist than post-modernist, but that in his attempt to capture particular icons and concepts, or 'to apprehend and depict the fragmented, unstable, and distressing bizarreries' (158) of American life, his novels collectively entail a 'postmodern iconography' of American experience. His analysis works as a series of short essays, which use different philosophical theories to explore particular texts from shifting perspectives. Nietzsche, Sartre, Deleuze, Marx, Jameson and Foucault, among others, figure in Tally's analysis, and their theoretical frameworks are explained clearly and succinctly in a manner that makes them accessible. Tally also speaks Vonnegut's language, literally; the incorporation of Vonnegut's terms into the analysis of his work – terms familiar to his fans, such as *granfalloon*, *karass*, and *Tralfamadorian* – shows the extent to which Tally infiltrates Vonnegut's world and then uses Vonnegut's own theoretical constructions to analyse the novels from within. He draws connections between the novels in order to elucidate the philosophical perspectives that he understands to be underpinning Vonnegut's work. Tally refers to the jaded and disenchanted position that flows consistently throughout the oeuvre as the 'paradoxical and parodic phrase' (xv) 'misanthropic humanism'. Tally states that Vonnegut creates a theoretical position to account for perpetual human weaknesses and our capacity to get in our own way, arguing 'that the liberation of humanity is thwarted by humanity itself' (xvi), evidenced by Vonnegut's failed utopias that exist in his novels.

While Tally composes some seamless segues, each chapter works as a standalone essay, which may be useful for those interested in particular books or theoretical perspectives (however, it does mean that subsequent chapters can be repetitive at times). Chapter One, 'A Postmodern Iconography', addresses the language and worlds that Vonnegut creates and the concepts behind them, as well as the individual and social constructs and iconoclastic representations of Americanisms that underpin his novels. The philosophical perspective regarding the ways in which humanity fails over and over again – Vonnegut's 'Misanthropic Humanism' – is extrapolated in Chapter Two, which focuses specifically on *Player Piano* and *The Sirens of Titan* as examples of his position. Chapter Three, 'Anxiety and the Jargon of Authenticity', presents existentialism as a context for understanding Vonnegut's misanthropic humanism through an analysis of *Mother Night*, and addresses how the desire for authenticity is destructive and ultimately unfeasible. In his exploration of *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* in 'The Dialectical of American Enlightenment', Tally focuses on Vonnegut's critiques of the 'grand narratives' of science and religion, and how he supplants the search for life's meaning in favour of a more mechanical understanding of humanity. Chapter Five, 'Eternal Returns, or Tralfamadorian Ethics' examines Vonnegut's confounding of space and time in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, reflecting Nietzsche's theory of the eternal return. 'Anti-Oedipus of the Heartland' uses Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis to reflect on the fragmentary and open-ended novel that is *Breakfast of Champions*, and the ways in which schizophrenia manifests within the narrative both thematically and in form. Chapter Seven, 'Imaginary Communities, or, the Ends of the Political', describes Vonnegut's analysis of community and obligatory

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relationships evident in *Slapstick* and *Jailbird*, as well political *granfalloon*s – an organised group with meaningless associations but a shared ‘purpose’. Chapter Eight, ‘Abstract Idealism’, focuses on Vonnegut’s aesthetics and the role of art, and artists, in American society in *Deadeye Dick* and *Bluebeard*. Tally, here, deviates briefly from his otherwise chronological analysis of the development of Vonnegut’s philosophical argument and endeavour with the inclusion of *Bluebeard* before *Galápagos*, in order for his logic to follow the development of Vonnegut’s theoretical perspective more succinctly. The eradication of humans in *Galápagos* in favour of smaller-brained creatures whose self-awareness is far less advanced and, consequently, less destructive completes the culmination of Vonnegut’s misanthropic humanism, examined in ‘Apocalypse in the Optative Mood’. Tally’s disdain for Vonnegut’s final novels – *Hocus Pocus*, which is ultimately a novel about death, and *Timequake*, the ‘non-novel’ (148) which combines fiction and biography with linguistic experimentation and the idea of resurrection – is clear in the final essay, ‘Twilight of the Icons’. The novels deviate from Tally’s arguments regarding Vonnegut’s quest for the American novel, but he suggests that they offer an encompassing coda to his unsuccessful project.

Tally’s understanding of Vonnegut’s work comprises ‘a sustained though fractured narrative of characters and themes that underlie that older project’ (2), writing the great American novel. These narratives and themes are what make up Tally’s notion of a postmodern iconography evident in Vonnegut’s collective work. Tally states that Vonnegut creates ‘a scattered and critical portrait of American life at the very moment of its seeming transcendence, the postwar period which began America’s reign as a leading world power, with all the absurdity and horror that accompanies such a position’ (3). The iconography, then, is the collection of particular themes and archetypes and Americana, and Americanisms that create a collage and pastiche of American experience. While Tally ultimately argues that Vonnegut fails in his attempt to capture this in the Great American Novel, he considers Vonnegut’s attempt at creating an exemplary American iconography to be valuable and necessary:

the American novel functions as a means of making sense of this thing, this life in the United States at a given time and in a given position within an ever more unrepresentable world system of which all American experience was ever a part, no matter what the dreams or nightmares of an ideology of American exceptionalism averred. (156)

Tally asserts that, ‘The great American novel is always a dream deferred; it cannot really exist, it seems, for that very reality would probably undermine any novel’s greatness’ (1). The ‘Great American Novel’ is, for both Tally and Vonnegut, a kind of white whale, and its value lies in its unattainability, its elusiveness; its Americanness, specifically, is presented as a particular ideal, specific to the country. Each argument and each theoretical and philosophical perspective in Tally’s book, can, however, be read more globally, as the concerns addressed in Vonnegut’s novels seem to me more universal than Tally asserts. While there is obviously particularly American imagery and localised concerns, as is Vonnegut’s penchant, the arguments regarding his philosophies are generalisable to a wider context. ‘The American Novel’ seems to stand for something unique in Tally’s eyes, but Vonnegut is arguably more interested in creating utopic/dystopic worlds in order to comprehend humanity.

Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel offers a comprehensive and considered take on Vonnegut’s novels in the light of influential philosophers and cultural theorists. Where this may

be of particular interest to Vonnegut fans and American literature scholars, the application of the particular theoretical positions are generalizable and useful to a far wider readership. The book succeeds in capturing the particular genius of Vonnegut's work, and certainly encourages or reignites quietly dormant fandom.

Rosslyn Almond